



FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S WISE BLOOD: A RECAPITULATION OF THE STORY OF ST. PAUL OF NEW TESTAMENT

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ABSTRACT

Flannery O'Connor's reputation as a writer first flowered because of her remarkable short stories and novels. The vision of reality which underlies her works seems strangely out of harmony with our materialistic essentially no-religious society. Although her stories are Southern to the core, she was never actively part of any Southern literary movement and for the most part of her fiction does not reflect social issues, particularly the social problems, which beset the South during her lifetime. Despite her Catholic Faith, the characters of the bulk of her fiction are Protestant Fundamentalists or Fanatics. Miss O'Connor's sympathies were clearly aligned the mistaken truth-seekers, the raging, and the irrational, even sinful prophets, some of whom seem to have wandered into the modern world from the pages of the Old Testament. They at least have some awareness of reality, some cognizance of the Divine Plan, she contended. They may reject or prevent the world but they cannot escape it. On the other hand Miss O'Connor's utmost scorn was showered upon the secularities bogged in their material world and unable or unwilling to perceive the grand design of existence, the plan of Redemption. Hazel Motes presents a figure reminiscent of Milton's Satan, a Christ of Evil. Consumed by evils as he is, Hazel like Satan cannot ignore nor even long be away from Christ. His suffering is the realization of loss, of man's fall. So darkened is his spirit by the chaos of his soul that grace cannot penetrate it, and he plunges deeper into darkness. O'Connor's work is littered with characters like Hazel Motes, who starts a heretical Church and commits murder before his conversion. Throughout the Bible, readers encounter figures such as Paul, who began sinning his way to Jesus as a persecutor of the early Christian Church before his conversion at Damascus, or Moses, who murders an Egyptian and flees to Midian before being called by God to free the Israelites. Throughout O'Connor's works there are significant biblical allusions which have been overlooked. O'Connor's unique approach, that is her attempt to engage her biblical source material in a unique way in order to reach a mass audience, grows out of her frustration over her parish's tendency to avoid the intellectual and spiritual problems confronting Catholicism in the twentieth century since she was opposed to practiced form of worship that enabled people to recite 'readymade' prayers instead of searching their own souls; instead O'Connor frequently encouraged growing interest in Biblical studies. The novel *Wise Blood* recapitulates the story of St. Paul of the New Testament. This study compares Hazel Motes with the Biblical parallel St. Paul.

KEY WORDS: Church Without Christ, Fall, Redemption, Judgement, Evangelist, Biblical Allusions.

Flannery O'Connor included in a series of modern spiritual masters. Her name evokes the passions of Southern firebrands battling inexorable forces, and her fame rests secure on her novels and short stories. Besides being a story teller, O'Connor was an accomplished letter writer, literary critic, religious thinker, and public intellectual. One can hear yet another voice in her repeatedly astute observations on scripture and God, but she denied having any authority on these sacred subjects. O'Connor is too quick in discounting her level of engagement with divine matters. Her various forms of writing treat God, his attributes and relations with universe. As a Christian, O'Connor has only one ground of identity, namely, God.

The inner drive for O'Connor was always toward home and the true abode and final shelter with God. Everything she wrote has this double momentum of home and faith and their counterparts of exile and unbelief. In her fiction, the characters all seek a place of rest and safety. Typically, the physical act of getting home implied the moving nearer to God. *Wise Blood* is her first novel, published in 1952. O'Connor reminds us that the body is made for him who made it and that we can trust in God's compassion. In the end the body teaches the soul about God's plan to restore all things to him.

Her penetrating vision became evident when her first novel, *Wise Blood*, appeared in 1952. This novel tells the story of Hazel Motes, who as a boy was told by his preacher grandfather that he, "a sinful and unthinking" youngster, was one of the millions for whom Jesus had his "arms and legs stretched on the cross" and that Jesus "wasn't going to leave him ever". Unlike the liberal, rational and enlightened persons in the novel who have had the moral and spiritual sense bred out of them, Motes, regards sin, Jesus and redemption as serious matters of life and death. Haunted by his sense of sin and terrified by a pursuing, soul-hungry Jesus, Hazel spends the rest of his life trying to avoid sin in order to avoid Jesus. The drama centers on the many wills conflicting in Motes: the will to flee this demanding crucified Jesus, the will to deny Jesus' divinity, and the will to find the truth. Motes really doesn't know what he wants except that he needs to avoid the suffering called upon him by the figure who was nailed on the cross. He tries to avoid his personal wickedness not by seeking love or virtue but by getting rid of the Jesus who atones for the evils that is Motes' nature. In this penchant for extremes, he even becomes an evangelist for "the Church Without Christ" – the Church where the blind don't see and the lame don't walk, and what's dead stays dead. In the mystical quest the soul finds God in the darkness. Motes see that he cannot see and knows that he does not know what the truth is.

O'Connor begins with God as mystery. Mystery, one of her favourite words, is the ground of creation and of her spirituality. When the hero of *Wise Blood* founds "the Holy Church of Christ without Christ," he brings into the open what Christianity in many instances has become in the modern world. By removing

Christ, such a church sets out to remove pain and ends up precluding transcendence.

Throughout O'Connor's works, there are significant biblical allusions. O'Connor's stories engage their biblical analogues in unusual, unexpected and sometimes grotesque manipulations, while conveying the same message as their biblical counterparts. She was opposed to practiced forms of worship that enabled people to recite ready-made prayers instead of searching their own souls. She encouraged the interest in biblical studies. Her works were influenced by the bible. She used these biblical allusions to add meaning, especially Christian meaning to her fiction. She is explicit in her dependence upon the Bible.

Her success derives from the uniqueness of her approach. The publication of *Wise Blood* gave her national attention. The novel is about a young boy, reared by an evangelistic father who preaches the gospel of salvation and is moved to preach in the name of the church without Jesus. O'Connor drew several biblical sources for *Wise Blood*, but most notable is her interest in the life of St. Paul.

In the novel, O'Connor re-imagines Paul's life, conversion and ministry through the character of Hazel Motes. Both stories tell of the transformation of a Pharisee into an apostle. *Wise Blood* reverberates with biblical echoes of Paul of Tarsus, struck blind in the road to Damascus and healed with the new vision of faith. The comparison begins with Paul's youth, since before he was one of the most influential figures in Christianity. Paul was known as Saul and was a respected member of the Jewish community. His father was a Pharisee and a Roman citizen. He got an excellent education in Tarsus and Jerusalem. He studied with the great Rabbi Gamaliel. Paul could gain an incomparable knowledge of scripture and a subtle and refined manner of argument. He was a well-known and respected Jew and a member of the Sanhedrin, publicly aligned himself against the early Christian church.

When Hazel leaves the army, he tries to adopt the atheistic sensibilities of his peers who tell him "nobody was interested in his goddam soul unless it was the priest" (O'Connor, 1988). He tells himself that he no longer has to avoid sin because he does not have a soul and sin cannot exist. He argues that "there was no Fall because there was nothing to fall from and no Redemption because there was no Fall and no Judgement because there wasn't the first two" (O'Connor, 1988).

When he arrives in Tulkinham, he was trying to convince himself that sin does not exist. Then he visits a prostitute whose address he finds in the stall of the train station bathroom. "He felt that he should have a woman, not for the sake of pleasure in her, but to prove that he didn't believe in sin since he practiced what was called it" (O'Connor, 1988). He uses sex to reinforce his traditional notions of

sin, yet he still maintains a wordless conviction... that the way to avoid Jesus was to avoid sin" (O'Connor, 1988).

To prove his own freedom from Redemption, Hazel Motes starts his own church, the church without Christ. Like Saul, Motes' church teaches, "Nothing matters but that Jesus was a liar", is positioned in direct opposition against Christianity (O'Connor, 1988). Hazel fails in almost all of his endeavours; even with his attempts to sin.

Like Saul, Motes starts ministry as the persecutor of the Christian church:

"Where has the blood you think you been deemed by touched you?"

"Rabble rouser," the little man said. "One thing I can't stand it's a rabble rouser."

"What church you belong to you boy there?" Haze asked, pointing at the tallest boy in the red satin lumber jacket.

The boy giggled.

"You then," he said impatiently, pointing at the next one. "What church you belong to?"

"Church of Christ," the boy said in a falsetto to hide the truth.

"Church of Christ" Hazel repeated. "Well, I preach The Church Without Christ.

I am member and preacher to that church where the blind don't see and the lame don't walk and what's dead stays that way" (O'Connor, 1988).

He satirizes the basic tenants of the Christianity. He claimed that there is no need for redemption, no resurrection and no miracles. Through these teachings he takes on the role of Saul, the Church's persecutor. Paul writes: "I persecuted the Church of God violently"

(The Holy Bible, 1991). Before his conversion Saul was against the disciples of the Lord and persecuted them. As he was travelling, it was happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him, and he fell the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" And he said "who are you, Lord?" And He said, I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do" (The Holy Bible, 1991).

This encounter which physically blinded Saul serves as the catalyst for his paradigm shift, transforming him into an outspoken Christian Evangelist and saint of the Christian Church. He became an active missionary, epistler, and a principle leader of the early Christian Church.

Many events in the life of Paul are recapitulated through Hazel Motes' own experiences in *Wise Blood*. Hazel's own background serves as an inverse to Paul's formal education. Paul received the best education available to him. Hazel attends "a country school where he had learned to read and write but that it was wiser not to. The Bible was the only book he read" (O'Connor, 1988). Motes' grandfather was a circuit preacher who preached sermons from atop his car, a tradition Hazel follows.

While Paul had a strict Jewish upbringing and was subject to the "spiritual and cultural forces of his youth," Hazel's own tutelage under his grandfather serves as an apt parallel. Hazel carries a black Bible and a pair of silver trimmed spectacles" with him throughout the novel, reinforcing the religious and vision motifs (O'Connor, 1988).

Hazel does not have the privilege and respect like Paul; rather he is poor, uneducated and ignored by his peers. Hazel Motes like young Saul achieved a pharisaical understanding of the law. Motes never really accept the tenants of Christianity. He realizes that to follow Jesus is to invite uncertainty. He believes that the "way to avoid Jesus was to avoid sin" (O'Connor, 1988). The wild ragged figure of Jesus haunted him in his every movement.

Paul and Motes play a major role in murder. Saul's participation in Stephen's death, the first Christian martyr, is unclear. But when the participants began stoning Stephen, they "laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul" who is in hearty agreement with putting him to death" (The Holy Bible, 1991). Hazel Motes uses his car to kill Solace Layfield firsthand, in a way re-enacting Stephen's death. Hazel is shocked when Layfield becomes a martyr similar to Stephen through his death.

The strongest parallel between Hazel Motes and Paul occurs within their conversions. Both conversions occur right after an execution. In the two conversion stories blindness serves as a catalyst. Similarly both take place on the road and each figure functions as a persecutor of Christ.

Hazel is pulled over by a patrolman, who explains to Hazel that he didn't pull him over for a legal violation, but rather because "I just don't like your face"

(O'Connor, 1988). The policeman removes Hazel from the car over an embankment, destroying the entirety of the Church without Christ. After the loss of his vehicle, Hazel is finally forced to confront reality. Before he leaves Tullinham, he tells one mechanic, "this car is just beginning its life. A lightening bolt couldn't stop it" (O'Connor, 1988). A reference to a lightening bolt furthers "the allusion to Paul's being struck on the road to Damascus. The destruction of his automobile represents the end of Hazel's heretical ministry and parallels Saul's Pharisaical On the road to Damascus, Paul is jolted out of his rigid Pharisaism while Hazel is stunned out of his rigid nihilism on the road leaving Tullinham. In Paul's encounter he has a finite destination. But the officer asks Hazel, "was you going anywhere," he responds, "No" (O'Connor, 1988). Paul is blinded during his experience on the road and told to head toward the city where he can be healed; Hazel is blinded immediately after he arrives in the city. Paul's blinding is only temporary, lasting only three days, Hazel's is permanent. Motes has admitted his own blindness by blinding himself in order to receive sight.

Through Hazel Motes, in *Wise Blood* Flannery O'Connor offers a comic retelling of the story of a Christian prophet St. Paul, undergoing a miraculous transformation. By modernising it she makes it fresh for her audience. In a unique way, she transforms the biblical narrative. She takes the important ideas, but places them in the contemporary South.

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